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Truth About Watergate Begins to Surface

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More than a decade after the event, data are emerging that suggest the Watergate episode of the early '70s ended in a gross miscarriage of justice.

Not that the Nixon Administration and various of its officials were innocent; there is plenty of evidence that they sought to cover up the scandal resulting from the break-in at the Democratic National Committee. It is rather that other and arguably more serious culprits were allowed to get away scot-free, their misdeeds (and the ultimate truth about the episode) obscured in the canonical version of the story.

Details that go to prove the point have been pieced together by former *Harper's* Washington Editor Jim Hougan in a volume called *Secret Agenda* (hard-cover version published by Random House; paperback from Ballantine Books). Many of Hougan's findings, drawing on previously unpublished FBI reports among other sources, confirm and amplify points originally raised by Fred D. Thompson, minority counsel to the Senate Watergate Committee, in his 1975 book, *At That Point in Time* (Quadrangle Books).*

According to the official version, Watergate was a black-and-white morality play in which the evil Nixonites bugged the Democratic national headquarters, then tried to cover up the mess when their bungling agents got arrested. Among the felonies alleged to Nixon was that he tried to steer the FBI away from investigating the matter by falsely claiming it was a CIA endeavor and otherwise tried to make the agency a patsy for his crimes.

The irony is that, according to the voluminous data pulled together by Hougan (and by Thompson), the fingerprints of the CIA were all over the operation from the outset. More than this, there is copious reason to believe the "third-rate burglary" was a set-up meant to fail—including the fact that the Democratic victims were informed about it in advance. These items were ignored at the time because they didn't fit the morality play with Nixon as the heavy. Among the specifics:

- Nearly all the major actors in the Watergate break-in—E. Howard Hunt, James McCord, and a group of Cuban exiles—were former CIA functionaries. Hunt and McCord, indeed, were men of considerable stature within the agency. (And, as Hougan demonstrates, there are ample grounds for questioning the "former" designation.)

- When Hunt supposedly resigned from the CIA in 1970, he went on the payroll of the Mullen Co., a company that was used as a cover for CIA operations, then went on to the staff of the White House. While in the latter capacity, he continued receiving technical aid from the CIA and, as we learn from Hougan, filed reports to the agency concerning his nominal new employers.

- After his arrest, McCord was in continual contact with the CIA—sending at least five secret letters urging a maximum effort to protect the agency from adverse publicity resulting from Watergate. These missives are full of passionate concern for the CIA—for whom he supposedly *wasn't* working—and detestation of Nixon—for whom he supposedly *was*.

- The Chicago supplier who provided McCord with the bugging equipment allegedly to be used at the DNC said he did so because McCord was able to produce documentation that he was with the CIA. According to another witness, this dealer in turn justified the transaction by producing a letter of authorization from the agency.

- After his arrest, Hunt stayed in contact with the Mullen Co. So, as it happened, did Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*. According to CIA memoranda reproduced by Hougan, the head of the company bragged that he had steered Woodward away from implicating either Mullen or the CIA and that Woodward had been supplied with other leads for which he was "suitably grateful."

- During the Watergate investi-

gation, former CIA Director Richard Helms acknowledged that agency records pertaining to the case had been destroyed. So, coincidentally, were all of McCord's records which might have revealed the degree of his continuing connection with the CIA. An agency operative assisted in the burning of McCord's papers.

- As interesting as the CIA involvement was the fact that the Democrats had been informed of the impending break-in—with most of the *dramatis personae* named—two months before the event, but made no effort to prevent it or inform the authorities. Equally intriguing is the fact that, according to the FBI reports, the only "bug" found at the DNC was not discovered until three months after the break-in, apparently planted for the purpose of being found.

There is much more in similar vein—which doesn't answer the question of why the break-in occurred, but certainly raises the question anew. It also doesn't mean the people involved in the cover-up had any love for the CIA, which they targeted for destruction as soon as Nixon was disposed of. What seems quite clear in retrospect is that the official history of Watergate has been constructed (most successfully) for the single purpose of discrediting Richard Nixon. ■

* Thompson's book in turn drew heavily on the Watergate minority report filed by then Sen. Howard Baker (R.-Tenn.). Much of this same material is traversed, from a radically different perspective, by former New Left leader Carl Oglesby in *The Yankee and Cowboy War* (Sheed Andrews and McMeel; 1976).